



GONZALO FIGUEROA GARCIA-HUIDOBRO (1931-2008)

A LOOK BACK

"REPORTING CALLING AT SALA-Y-GOMEZ AND EASTER ISLANDS"

With annotations by Shawn McLaughlin

The following is a report made by Commander Bouverie Clark to Rear-Admiral Algernon Lyons, Commander-in-Chief of the Royal Navy, based on the late 19th century visit of the H.M.S. *Sappho* to Easter Island and first published in the *Proceedings of the Royal Geographical Society of Australasia, South Australian Branch* in 1899.

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H.M.S. *Sappho*, at Sea, lat. 28° 01' S., long. 114° 02' W.,
20th June, 1882

Sir —

[1.] I have the honor to inform you that I touched at Easter Island in H.M. ship under my command on the passage from Coquimbo¹ to Pitcairn Island, and as the *Sappho* is the first English man-of-war that has visited the island since the *Topaze* was there in 1869 (as far as I can discover), and as it is much changed since then, I think it right to give you a detailed account of my visit.

2. Before arriving at Easter Island I sighted Sala-y-Gomez at midnight on the 13th, and thinking it desirable to examine it to search for wreckage, &c., I lay to till the morning when I steamed up to within half a mile of the lee side, but saw nothing except some very weather-beaten barks of timber that looked as if they had been there a long time. There was a heavy swell on, and landing did not appear at to be practicable anywhere without risk. Scott Reef was showing plainly, with occasional heavy breakers on it, and is a danger for any ship passing at night, especially as Sala-y-Gomez is so low that it would not show if very dark until close in.

3. Easter Island was sighted, distant about 30 miles, at daylight on the seventeenth day from Coquimbo (June 16th), and on getting up to the east end I intended to anchor off Mt. Topaze² for the night but as the south-west swell appeared to make the landing very bad, I gave up the idea and steamed round to Cook Bay [a/k/a Caleta Hanga Roa], where I anchored in the evening. In rounding Cape South-west [Hanga Ha-have?] I passed between Needle Rock³ and the mainland, and I may mention here that the passage, as well as the one between the two islands, is perfectly clear and free from all danger, with deep water in both. The high cliff which towers over you as you pass makes it a very striking and picturesque sight.

4. On passing the village of Malaveri [*sic*; Mataveri — more a region or gathering place of clans than a village *per se*] I was surprised to see the English flag hoisted on a lofty flag-staff, and shortly after anchoring, I was boarded by Mr. Alexander Salmon, the agent of the "Maison Brander" of Tahiti,

who now owns the great part of the island, and from him (during my two day's stay) I got the information I am about to detail. I may add that Mr. Salmon speaks the native language thoroughly, having learnt it as a boy from Easter Island natives employed by the "Maison Brander" at Tahiti, and therefore all the information I got about the native names and traditions may, I think, be relied on.

5. The "Maison Brander" have traded to Easter Island at intervals for some years, and about four years ago bought from the Bishop of Tahiti the property of the missionaries who were on the island, who then left for the Gambier Islands, taking with him about 800 of the natives of the island. There was also a Frenchman, named Bornier,⁵ who was murdered about two years ago by the natives for intriguing with their women.⁵ His property has also come into their hands, and they have bought more since, so that now they own the greater part of the island.

6. They have now on it about 10,000 sheep and about 400 head of cattle; and as there are two (and sometimes three) lambing seasons in the year, their flocks are increasing very rapidly. The pasture is plentiful, but Mr. Salmon says does not fatten the stock much, but wherever he has sown good grass seed a good result has been obtained. With the present number of sheep he gets about 18 tons of wool a year.⁶

7. There are enormous numbers of poultry on the island in a semi-wild state, but all owned by natives and known by their owners; and in fact a fleet could easily be supplied with fresh provisions, with the exception of vegetables, which are scarce at short notice; but as yams and sweet potatoes, banana, and plantains grow in abundance, they also could be got in time. Water is the only scarce article, but with that exception passing vessels calling at Easter Island could get all needful supplies of fresh provisions.

8. There are now only about 150 natives on the island, and they are not increasing, as the death rate balances the birth rate, if it does not exceed it. About eight years ago the "Maison Brander" shipped about 500 to Tahiti to work on their plantations there, which, with the 800 taken with them by the missionaries, accounts for the difference of population since Commodore Powell's visit. I looked in vain for any traces of the personal beauty of the race described by him; if it ever existed the fortunate possessors must have been amongst those who emigrated.

9. There is also no trace of the missionaries' work. The remaining natives have no religion at all, are expert thieves, and very revengeful, and never forget or forgive a blow, although in general good-tempered. They have no religious ceremonies or observances; a marriage is arranged by buying a wife for a patch of potatoes, and it only holds good so long as it will suit either, or both, to remain faithful to the other.⁷

10. They are divided into several small clans, amongst which strength and personal courage is the only claim to superiority, and their chief quarrels are over the efforts of each clan to secure the first eggs of the "wide-awake"⁸ every year from Needle Rock,⁹ to which they attach a superstitious value. The man who gets the first gives it to some one of his clan, and he himself has to become a hermit for a year, living by

himself, and not washing or cutting his hair or nails during that time. As there is a heavy surf at the bottom of the cliffs opposite the Needle Rock, several lives are lost nearly every year while they are seeking for the eggs.

11. Mr. Salmon says that, after long talks with the natives on the subject, they all say they originally landed on the north side of the island at Anakena, and came from the *East* in two canoes, provisioned with yams, taro, and sweet potatoes. The King (by name HOTOMETVA, or "The prolific father") [Hotu Matu'a] was in one canoe and the Queen in the other, and on making the land they separated, passing round in opposite directions and meeting again at Anakena, where they landed, and then settled on Mount Topaze, of which the native name is Hotu-iti,¹⁰ so called after the youngest son of the King, and not as given on the chart. They there built the stone houses the remains of which still exist,¹¹ and made the statues with which the hill¹² is covered; but the first statue was not made till some fifty years after they landed. This version of their traditions appears to be more likely than that given in pages 483-4-5 of the "South Pacific Directory." Also, the original native name for the island was Te Pilo-Fenva (the middle of the sea; or, the land in the middle of the sea) not Rapa-nui.¹³

12. The anchorage in Cook Bay appears to be very accurately laid down in the chart, except that Point Roa runs about a cable¹⁴ further than given there, so that a ship coming in with the mission bearing east-south-east will be in 16 fathoms¹⁵ when Point Roa and the south extremes of the island are in line.

13. The landing at Cook Bay is not very good., it being very shallow in shore, with rocky bottom, necessitating wading or being carried ashore; but at Hanga Piko there is a very good landing-place, only the channel into it is narrow, and, with any swell on, the breakers on one side are rather alarming. However, it never breaks across the channel except in a gale, and I had a rock blown up during our stay which will improve the passage.

14. I was immediately struck with the fertility of the soil, if it was only cultivated I believe it would produce magnificent crops, and it seemed to me to be especially adapted for the culture of the vines, of which as yet there are none on the island. Mr. Salmon is quite along amongst the natives, and has no time for anything but the care of his flocks and herds.

15. The extinct volcano of Te Rana Kao [*sic*; Rano Kau], on the south-west corner of the island, is well worthy of the praises bestowed on it by Commodore Powell — it will repay anyone for a visit to the island. The bottom is not level, as described in the sailing directions by Findlong;¹⁶ on the contrary, there is no bottom at 50 fathoms in the centre of the crater,¹⁷ but there is a carpet of decayed vegetation spread over the water on which one can cross from side to side. There are wild duck to be shot amongst the pools, and wild boar¹⁸ round the edges of the water as also in the crater of Mount Topaze.

16. Mr. Salmon informed me that during the last months large quantities of sawn planks have been washed up on the north and south-east coasts of the island, which, he thinks, must be from the wreck of a timber-laden ship.¹⁹ A spar²⁰ was

also found, but the natives had cut it up before he heard of it.

17. In conclusion, I beg to suggest for your consideration the advisability, seeing that the island is almost entirely governed by an English subject, of her Majesty's Government now extending some sort of protectorate over it. — I have, &c.,

(Signed) Bouverie F. Clark, Commander

NOTES

- ¹ A port city and capital of the Elqui Province, located on what is now the Pan-American Highway, in the Coquimbo Region of Chile; it lies in a valley 10 km (6.2 mi.) south of La Serena.
- ² There is no "Mt. Topaze" on Easter Island (at least not as identifiable today), so it's difficult to say to what this refers. From the *Sappho's* position, this may be a reference to an anchorage off 'Anakena and therefore one of the hills adjacent thereto (e.g., Te Puha Noa) — in keeping with the description of sailing towards Cook Bay by way of the southwest coast and the nearby islets. On the other hand, the *Topaze* in 1868 made anchorage at Cook Bay, but there are no hills in the vicinity to which "Mt. Topaze" might be attributed. Or this might also be a reference to Rano Raraku.
- ³ This is no doubt a reference to Motu Kao Kao owing to its pinnacle-shape; in Rapanui *kao kao* means "slender".
- ⁴ Jean-Baptiste Onéxime Dutrou-Bornier, a French sea captain and former officer in the Crimean Army.
- ⁵ According to McCall, Dutrou-Bornier's reign ended when islanders murdered him over a dispute about the making of a dress for his Rapanui wife. Routledge relates that he was hastily buried on a hillock near the cliff just outside the plantation, his grave marked by a circle of stones: "To those occupying a French warship that arrived almost immediately afterwards, the islanders explained that Bornier had been killed by a fall from a horse".
- ⁶ The peak annual yield was at least 30 tons and possibly upwards of 50.
- ⁷ Reports of thievery by Easter Islanders are rife amongst accounts of many early visitors but these events reflect differences in the value of ownership of material objects — something that was difficult for outsiders to understand. While the judgment of the importance of marriage may have been accurate during Clark's visit and variations on this cavalier approach were similarly reported by Roussel, within ten years both religious rituals and marriage ceremonies became more widely known and appreciated, making one wonder about the difference between what Clark reported and what was actually going on. As with the "thievery", it wouldn't be the first time that an outsider misunderstood what he was seeing or even experiencing.
- ⁸ This term is used synonymously with the Sooty Tern (formerly *Sterna fuscata* now *Onychoprion fuscatus* effective 2005) or *manutara* bird. It's derived from a sailor's description of the cry the bird makes.
- ⁹ The recovery of the egg was effected from Motu Nui, not Motu Kao Kao; the passage also makes it sound as if "Needle Rock" refers to all three islets as one.
- ¹⁰ The geography seems confused here in so far as "Hotu-iti" — most likely "Hotu Iti", at the south end of the neck of the Poike Peninsula where a bay shares this name — is 5 mi. (8 km) southeast of 'Anakena.
- ¹¹ The "stone houses" here could be referring to the remains of *ahu* at 'Anakena and its environs, for the only other commonly described stone houses are those at 'Orongo, and this most certainly wouldn't apply given the location of the exploration party.
- ¹² Rano Raraku, most likely.
- ¹³ "Te Pilo-Fenva" = "Te Pito Henua"; the name "Rapa Nui", however, wasn't assigned to the island until Tahitian sailors in the 1860s gave it this name to distinguish it from Rapa Iti in French Polynesia.
- ¹⁴ A spit of land jutting westward into the ocean south of Caleta Hanga Roa. A cable equals 200 yd., so the distance here is 200 yd. or 183 m.

- ¹⁵ As 1 fathom equals 6 ft. or 1.82 m, 16 fathoms equals 96 ft. or 29 m.
- ¹⁶ This name, if it is a proper name, does not seem to appear in any of the known literature about Easter Island. It's possible the name is misspelled or refers to a proper noun rather than a person's name, but its origin and existence remains unidentifiable at present.
- ¹⁷ A depth of 50 fathoms is equal to 300 ft. (or 91 m), yet, as of 2006, the estimate for the depth of the water in the crater lake was 30 ft. (9 m). Depending on one's position around the crater rim, the distance down to the surface of the lake is anywhere from 626 to 820 ft. (200 to 250 m) — but, regardless, even if measurements were being made from the rim of the caldera, it does not seem likely that 270 ft. (82 m) of water in the crater has disappeared in a century and a quarter. Or perhaps the lake was really deeper then because less of the interior talus of the volcano had fallen in and filled in the bottom of the crater?
- ¹⁸ It's entirely possible wild boar was on the island at this time but domestic pigs were a more common introduction. La Pérouse attempted to introduce goats, pigs, sheep, and seeds of orange and lemon trees, maize, and other cereals — but the islanders, owing no doubt to their desperate need for improved diet, especially where protein is concerned, tended to devour any such introductions before they had a chance to propagate.
- ¹⁹ Ever since the deforestation that wreaked havoc on the island's ecosystem and culture, wood has been a valuable commodity on Easter Island. A shipwreck in 1882 near the island resulted in the washing ashore of sawn planks which were enthusiastically put to good use immediately. As recently as July of 1983 a freighter carrying a load of wood bound for mills in Australia ran aground off the island's west coast near Tahai. The crew dumped the cargo in an effort to save the ship and the wood was salvaged by the Rapanui who put it to unprecedented use in tourist carvings. And in September of 1996, the *Praga*, a Chilean merchant ship loaded with supplies for the island, was lost at sea after an overloaded cargo shifted during heavy waves and strong winds. Among its holdings? Wood. Indeed, the word *rakau* — meaning "tree", "wood", or "timber" elsewhere in Polynesia — means "riches" or "wealth" on Easter Island.
- ²⁰ A stout pole or piece of timber, especially used in nautical contexts to refer to a post made of any material used as the mast of a ship.

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